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## Book Reviews

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### **Old Testament Problems:** Critical Studies in the Psalms and Isaiah.

By JAMES WILLIAM THIRTLE, LL.D., D.D. London, Edinburgh, Glasgow, New York, and Toronto: Henry Frowde, 1907. Pp. viii + 336.

The author has become known to the public through an earlier work, *The Titles of the Psalms*, in which he maintained the thesis that, of the two kinds of inscriptions now found in the Psalter, only the literary and historic notices were in the first instance superscriptions, the liturgical directions, such as "To the chief musician upon Gittith," being really subscript lines which belong in every case to the preceding Psalms, just as Hab. 3:19b is found at the close of the psalm to which it belongs, and Dr. Thirtle claims that the transfer of these subscript lines to the head of the following psalms is due to an error of editors or copyists.

The present work opens with a study of Pss. 120-134, the fifteen Songs of Degrees (or Ascents), passes on to the statement of the writer's positions respecting the Psalms as a whole, that they reflect the age of King Hezekiah, continues with a general exposition of Isaiah in which nearly all parts of our book are referred to Hezekiah's time, and an elaborate résumé of his conclusions and the bearing of these upon the "Canon of Scripture," and concludes with an appendix consisting of nineteen pages of "Brief Notes on the Psalms."

In the earlier chapters of the work our author quotes with favor "John Lightfoot," the seventeenth-century writer, as follows:

The degrees of the sun's reversing, and the fifteen years of Hezekiah's life-prolonging, may call to our minds the fifteen psalms of degrees, viz. from Ps. 120, and forward. These were Hezekiah's songs that were sung to the stringed instruments in the house of the Lord (Isa. 38:20): whether these were picked out by him for that purpose, be it left to censure. . . . Whoso, in reading those psalms, shall have his thoughts upon the danger of Jerusalem by Sennacherib, and her delivery—and the sickness of Hezekiah, and his recovery—shall find that they fit those occasions in many places very well. But I assert nothing, but leave it to examination.

He also refers with approval to the attempt of A. Wolfson in 1882 to connect these songs with Isa. 38:20 in a treatise called (in English) *The Shadow of the Degrees, or the Writing of Hezekiah*, but he claims that, through the application of his own remarkable discovery concerning the

inscriptions, the fifteen psalms may be faced in a more intelligent fashion than was possible to earlier authors, and that the weighty results of the present volume have come from careful and consistent attention to this discovery (see pp. iii, 14, 68, 282, 283, 297).

After the declaration that all previous explanations of the headline to Pss. 120-134 are unsatisfactory, it is stated that in order to advance a step a working assumption is needed. . . . That assumption is, that the title was intended to recall a reign or period, and to associate the songs therewith. In other words, the title "A Song of the Degrees" comes from a time when everyone knew King Hezekiah to have contributed to the Psalter; and it indicated every song over which it stood as "of the degrees," that is, associated with the "degrees" incident of the king's career (p. 18).

We are then told that the number of these songs, fifteen, commemorates "the fact that *fifteen* years was the period added to the king's life," and a strong hint is given that these are a part of the songs sung by the king which are referred to in Isa. 38:20. The life of Hezekiah is next considered, his prominence in affairs, political, social, religious, the officials that surrounded him, the literary men of his time, his fidelity to the temple services as suggested in II Chron. 29:30 and elsewhere being especially emphasized, and these considerations are regarded as sufficient to establish as a fact the theory "that the Songs of the Degrees were specifically compiled and in a definite manner associated with King Hezekiah and his experiences on the throne of Judah" (pp. 31, 32).

The author next proceeds to find in each of these psalms references, either to the great Assyrian invasion of 701 B. C., or to the sickness and recovery of Hezekiah, which are to be assigned to the same general period. He naïvely intimates that in poetry we must not expect to find very particular allusions and then proceeds to find general conditions that are sufficient to establish for him the date and occasions of these psalms. His treatment of Pss. 120 and 133 will serve as fair samples of the whole. In the former "they are for war" (vs. 7) corresponds to II Chron. 32:2, "his (Sennacherib's) face was to fight;" "In my distress, I cried" is compared with Isa. 37:3 where Hezekiah is reported as saying, "This day is a day of trouble" (or "distress"). The prayer of vs. 2, "Deliver my soul," finds its parallel in the words which Rabshakeh imagines in the mouth of Hezekiah, "The Lord will surely deliver us." It is stated that "the Assyrian leader was all that was implied in vss. 2 and 3, and in vs. 4 we have a singularly appropriate denunciation upon his impiety and deceit. In vs. 5 the king bemoans his situation as one surrounded by barbarians—men who know not the God of Israel and who hate peace. "From first to

last the song is true to the experiences of Hezekiah" (pp. 34, 35). In Ps. 133, the unity to which the Psalmist refers is regarded as paralleled in the specifications of II Chron. 30:10, 11, 18: "Once again there was a united Israel . . . united in the solemnities of the worship of Jehovah," and this is the occasion of the psalm. This part of the volume concludes with the intimation that Hezekiah and his men adopted four Davidic psalms and one by Solomon into the collection because they were easily adapted to the new situation; and while it is not actually said, it is almost unavoidably to be inferred that, in the author's opinion, they were chosen because David and Solomon possessed like Hezekiah typical features of the Messiah (pp. 67, 68).

The reader will perceive that the guess of Lightfoot is here supported on rather general considerations, which will be regarded as inadequate by many scholars; but our author has no doubt of their cogency and he proceeds by a similar method to draw some rather startling conclusions to the effect that Hezekiah's hand, or that of his men, is to be found throughout the Psalter; and on p. 88 he sums up such preceding statements as "Hezekiah was a greater man than we have been disposed to think and must be accorded a larger place in the Old Testament story;" "We hope in what follows to show that Hezekiah and his men had much to do with the formation of the Psalter" (p. 67); "We proceed to show that in some of its most distinctive portions, the Psalter is a reflection of the reign of Hezekiah" (p. 87) in the terms, "We found the life and work of Hezekiah reflected in a section of the Psalter, and reflected in a manner which suggested that he had a great part in the formation of the entire book." For further proof, the writer makes such statements as these:

If there were songs like those of the degrees, why not longer poems reflecting larger experiences. . . . To bring together such a collection of praise-writings as compose the Psalter, necessitated a force and influence such as Hezekiah was well able to exert and command. No other king after Solomon had the disposition and capacity to play such a part. . . . All at once, however, a change took place. The temple service was organized as had not been the case for centuries; the Psalms of David were collected and new ones were composed; and the Praises of Israel were consolidated in the volume which has, ever since that time, engaged the hearts and souls of those who seek after God (pp. 88, 89).

And so Dr. Thirtle goes on, reiterating his affirmations, first of one set of psalms, and then of another, until finally it is claimed that practically all the psalms reflect the age of Hezekiah, and were written, either by his men, or else were adapted by them from earlier psalms from the pen of David and others (chap. vii). These statements are accompanied by a very

ingenious exposition of the conditions of the Royal Library in Jerusalem, with the relation of the librarian to the precentor of the temple music and method of borrowing pieces for use in the temple. It is needless to say that all this is due to mere conjecture. The author claims to advance his main argument through some "Brief Notes" in an Appendix, but the coincidences of language herein noted are of the same general sort as those already mentioned in this review.

Nearly one-half of the book is given to a search for Hezekiah in the Book of Isaiah, and commentators of the book that have read our work must have found a surprise for themselves, for Hezekiah is found in nearly all parts of these prophecies. The social references, such as those found in 1:4; 57:3, refer to the Jerusalem of his day; Isa., chaps. 40-66, give comfort to the contemporaries of Hezekiah; chaps. 15-35 belong to the reign of Hezekiah and in order that we may know how to understand them, chaps. 36-39 are added (p. 156). The Servant of the Lord is generally Hezekiah—and therefore the name "Cyrus" must be read out of Isa., chaps. 44 and 45, and the whole applied to King Hezekiah, thereby correcting the erroneous theology of a later age (pp. 249-51). And in this way the author finds great help in his messianic typology. But into the details of this long section the present writer must not go.

The author cannot expect the scholarly world to fall in at once with a theory that he himself regards as revolutionary; and unless he can produce more positive evidence for it, he will be able to secure but a scanty following. The reviewer has attempted to do justice to the line of thought, and he has searched diligently for statements involving *probability*, as distinguished from *coincidence*, or *possibility*, but has to conclude that the first thing set forth to be proved is sustained by variety of assertion, rather than by positive evidence; that the author has passed on from that to graver conclusions without furnishing weightier considerations; and that, while such traditions of Hezekiah as we have would lead us to welcome any real evidence tending to establish the exact part of King Hezekiah in furnishing, or preserving, the literature of the Bible, the author's attempt to define it cannot be regarded as successful.

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